

HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
Historic Landmark Designation Case No. 12-01

Tiber Island
401-461 N Street SW, 430-490 M Street SW, 1201-1264 4th Street SW, and
1262 6th Street SW (All of Square 502)

Meeting Date:	May 24, 2012
Applicant:	Southwest Neighborhood Assembly
Owner:	Tiber Island Cooperative Homes, Inc. and Tiber Island Condominium
Affected ANC:	ANC 6D
Staff Reviewer:	Anne Brockett

Designed by Keyes, Lethbridge and Condon, Tiber Island is a residential complex of four high rise towers and 85 townhouses on an 8.4 acre parcel in Southwest Washington DC. Occupying all of Square 502, between M, N, and 4th Streets SW and the parkland abutting the Washington Channel, Tiber Island features modernist concrete and brick edifices carefully arranged in a landscape designed by Eric Paepcke. Its acclaimed role in the redevelopment of Washington's southwest quadrant is significant to the architectural, planning, and social history of the District of Columbia.

Historical Background

Recognizing an inadequate housing stock, Congress passed the District of Columbia Redevelopment Act of 1945 to address what was becoming a critical housing shortage following World War II. The Act would set a national example of redevelopment activities designed to reinvigorate cities and counteract outmigration to the suburbs as a result of growing automobile ownership. The Urban Renewal initiatives that followed leave a legacy of success and failure that continues to resonate throughout United States.

The premise behind Urban Renewal was to create public-private partnerships to enhance the city, increase its revenues, and provide housing and community amenities. These goals were accomplished by "slum clearance," through which the government used its power of eminent domain to acquire property and clear it of substandard buildings. The land was then leased or sold to public or private entities for redevelopment according to an approved plan. With the creation of the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA) under the Act, Washington DC was intended to be – and indeed became – a model of Urban Renewal for the rest of the country.

After a lack of funding stalled the RLA from proceeding with renewal projects, efforts began in earnest with the drafting of a number of plans that addressed the perceived problem of blight within the city. The 1950 Comprehensive Plan for Washington called for redevelopment in several areas of the District, including Southwest. Marshall Heights and Barry Farm were initially selected as the first site for Urban Renewal, but community and political opposition redirected the focus to Southwest. A series of other plans for this part of the city followed. The Peets Plan (1951), Justement-Smith Plan (1952), and Zeckendorf Plan (1956) debated, among other things, whether to rehabilitate existing building stock or construct new buildings and how much of the new housing would be for lower income residents. Ultimately, the vast majority of the buildings in Southwest were torn down with few of the residents able to return to the upscale complexes built in what was the nation's first Urban Renewal project.

Construction Begins in Southwest

The first construction to occur after land clearance was Capitol Park (1957-63), designed by architect Chloethiel Woodward Smith and landscape architect Dan Kiley. This designated landmark property mixed high rise apartments and low rise townhouses and provided a model for later Southwest projects. I.M. Pei's Town Center (1961-63) featured two concrete and glass towers and a strip of shops. Charles Goodman's River Park (1960-63) followed the model of an apartment building flanked by townhouses as did Harbour Square (1960-66), also by Smith and Kiley.

Keyes, Lethbridge and Condon were selected to develop Tiber Island (built 1963-65) through a design competition. As with other construction in the area, it mixed building heights and types and interspersed both large and intimate outdoor spaces throughout the property. A total of 368 apartments, distributed among four 8-story towers, form a pinwheel centered on a large open plaza. Eighty-five townhouses of two and three stories face into the complex. The 64 townhouses that ring the property became condominiums in 1965, while the 21 rental townhouses on the interior and the apartments became a cooperative in 1981.

The complex occupies all of Square 502, creating a sort of superblock. Superblocks became a popular planning tool in the early and mid-20th century, particularly for modernist mass housing projects. These properties assembled several city blocks and were designed to turn inward towards shared space, to separate pedestrians from vehicular traffic, to create walkable communities, and to eliminate alley systems, seen as areas of high crime. Although not as extensive as other superblocks built in the early and mid-20th century, Tiber Island's plan accomplishes some of the same goals. The townhouses all face inwards towards the central plaza, which covers the parking garage, allowing the pedestrian-focused interior to remain car-free. The landscaping radiates successively from the large open central plaza with fountain to smaller, more private courtyards, and finally to individual walled gardens for each townhouse.

Other original features include a pool, the central plaza with its fountain, an integrated security system, individually controlled air conditioning in each room, and intercoms for buzzing people in. The 1794 Thomas Law House, a designated landmark, faces a broad lawn and the Washington Channel and was incorporated into the development as a community center and meeting space.

The whole of the complex is unified through a consistency of materials and forms. On both townhouses and towers, tan brick with concrete bands forms a consistent exterior wall treatment. Stacked concrete balconies repeat on all buildings and provide articulated surfaces where balconies project and doors are inset. The modernist practice of supporting the apartment buildings on shaped concrete pilotis makes them seem to float over their glassy lobbies.

Altogether, the juxtaposition of large and small open areas, high and low buildings, and public and private landscaped spaces provides a unique sense of intimacy despite the density of residences and complexity despite the uniformity of design.

Tiber Island Completed

One year after completion, 95% of Tiber Island's apartments were rented, 19 of the 21 rental townhouses were occupied, and 55 of the 64 condos had been sold. This occupancy indicates the clear need for housing, the approval of modern residential architecture, the desire to live in Southwest, and an acceptance of condominium ownership. Tiber Island's condominiums are the first in the District of

Columbia. The concept of condominium ownership came late to the United States, with Puerto Rico enacting the first condo legislation in 1958. In 1961, the Federal Housing Authority began to insure condominiums for financing, opening this housing type to a broader group of potential buyers. The willingness of the government to support the condominium market no doubt affected the decision to use this type of ownership structure at Tiber Island.

That Urban Renewal in Southwest was intended to serve as a model for rest of country is evident in newspaper and journal articles of the day. Tiber Island was recognized repeatedly for both its contemporary design and as a successful Urban Renewal project. Praise was heaped on the project and its architects at the time of construction, culminating with an AIA Honor Award in 1966, when Tiber Island was one of three national recipients, the other two being Eero Saarinen's Dulles airport and his CBS Headquarters in New York. That same year, *Fortune Magazine* listed the project as one of the ten best buildings in the United States. *Architectural Forum* touted Tiber Island as "a new standard of architectural quality for U.S. urban renewal." Indeed, Keyes, Lethbridge and Condon's design was so successful that a close copy was erected as Carrollsburg Square across 4th Street from Tiber Island (completed in 1967).

Despite such high acclaim, Tiber Island was not without its controversies. As a whole, the Southwest Urban Renewal project eradicated whole communities, both physically and emotionally. Residents were summarily displaced to either public housing or to other, possibly less convenient, more expensive, locations. Neighborhood businesses were forced to relocate or close. Although racial and socio-economic discrimination were unquestionably part of the decision to move forward with Urban Renewal in Southwest, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in its landmark 1954 *Berman v. Parker* decision that the use of eminent domain for Urban Renewal was appropriate in the Nation's Capital.

As a result, over 150 19th century brick dwellings (facing both the streets and alley) on Square 502 alone were demolished along with a PEPCO substation, Greenleaf School, and a small commercial strip. The racial makeup of the Square was 60% white and 40% black, with most of the African American families living on the alley side. Tiber Island housed 12% non-white occupants after opening. Despite this seemingly low number, the integration of a private residential development at all was a monumental step towards equal housing opportunities in DC and the nation and served as a precursor to legislation banning discrimination practices in housing.

Interestingly, the much-maligned superblock was not unsuccessful at Tiber Island. The superblock concept is today regarded as a failure of urban planning, creating communities that turned their backs on the larger neighborhood and discouraged rather than encouraged pedestrian movement and street life along their perimeters. Landscapes that became dubbed "no man's land" in other superblocks work here, possibly because of ownership interests and the meticulous attention to maintenance.

Evaluation and Recommendation

Tiber Island is a significant property for its historical, architectural, and social contributions to the history of the District of Columbia and the nation. It meets D.C. designation Criteria A (events) and B (history) for its role in redeveloping Southwest as part of the nation's first Urban Renewal project, a program that had a profound effect on cities and how we have come to regard planning and housing nationwide. To this end, Tiber Island was considered a model for the rest of the country. It is also the site of the District's first condominiums, a now ubiquitous housing type, and it helped push for fair housing at a time when discriminatory real estate practices were rampant.

As an outstanding example of urban planning and modernist architecture, Tiber Island also meets Criteria D (architecture and urbanism) and F (the work of a creative master) for designation in the D.C. Inventory. The planning, landscaping, and architecture of Tiber Island speak to an idealism for urban living through its mix of high and low rise units, the integration of open landscapes and private gardens, and an acceptance of the automobile as a necessity for modern living while keeping it out of sight. Keyes, Lethbridge and Condon constructed a number of award-winning projects in the District of Columbia, with its Urban Renewal projects Tiber Island and Columbia Plaza receiving the most notoriety. The architectural simplicity of their buildings at Tiber Island create bold forms with subtle, sophisticated articulation and embellishment, establishing Tiber Island as a masterpiece of modern architecture on par with the work of contemporaries Marcel Breuer and Louis Kahn.

For these same reasons, Tiber Island meets Criteria A and C for listing in the National Register. It also meets Criteria Consideration G as a property of “exceptional importance” that is less than fifty years old. Sufficient historical perspective exists to examine Tiber Island within the context of Southwest development and to weigh the property’s significance. Tiber Island meets the threshold for its seminal role as part of the nation’s first Urban Renewal project. Its architecture and planning were touted as model for other Urban Renewal projects to follow and the importance of its design was immediately recognized. Its plan, architectural materials, and overall character are virtually untouched, maintaining its integrity of design, setting, materials, workmanship, location, feeling and association.

In addition, portions of the Tiber Island property appear to retain both prehistoric and historic archaeological potential, notably around the Thomas Law House. If present, archaeological resources have the potential to contain significant information on history and/or prehistory of the region.

The HPO recommends that the Historic Preservation Review Board designate Tiber Island, occupying all of Square 502, between M, N, and 4th Streets SW, as a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. It is further recommended that the application be forwarded to the National Park Service for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.